PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

LITTLE RED RIDING HOOD IN COLLEGE

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There has been much debate about the ethics and morality of student-faculty relationships on college campuses. Such relationships are almost always seen as exploitative and abusive, and the onus to prove otherwise rests on the people involved. What is it about these relationships that invokes such strong emotional reactions in people?

One very important part of the issue is how these relationships, and more specifically, how the people involved in them, are portrayed. The images used to describe the student (almost always a female) portray her as Little Red Riding Hood—innocent, childlike, and unaware of the dangers lurking in the academic forest. The professor, on the other hand, is seen as the Big Bad Wolf—lecherous, conniving, and on the prowl for innocent little girls. Before we accept these images as true, we need to ask ourselves whether they are justified. Furthermore, we must also consider the effect of these images on the direction and outcome of this debate.

Let us look at the first image—the student as Little Red Riding Hood. The literature on sexual harassment most often presents female students as innocent, childlike and unsuspecting of the perils that college life holds for them. Catherine MacKinnon (in Roiphe

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1993:148) clearly lays out the similarities between women and children:

> Some of the same reasons children are granted some specific legal avenues for redress—relative lack of power, inability to command respect for their consent and self-determination, in some cases less physical strength, or lower legitimacy in using it ... also hold true for the social position of women compared to men.

The metaphors used to describe student-faculty relationships rely on the same imagery of women as children to invoke outrage from the audience. Student-faculty relationships are often compared to the sacred bond between a parent and child. Thus, introducing intimacy or sexuality into such a relationship becomes "an act of domination, as despicable as the molestation of the daughter by the father" (Rich, in Dank and Fulda, 1998: 113). The image is carefully chosen to violate our sense of morality. We can all agree that children cannot give consent. If female students are like children then they cannot really give consent either, and any intimate relationship between a student and a teacher then becomes one of coercion, abuse, and exploitation.

But these images of women as weak and childlike are harmful to the very women they seek to protect. Such a protectionist stance implies that women cannot look after themselves, and it therefore eventually serves to disempower them. Feminists have been struggling against this type of paternalism and infantilization of women for decades. Yet, contrary to the anecdotal and empirical evidence, images of victimized and powerless women abound in the literature on consensual relationships. By portraying the female student as naïve and unwary, we misrepresent reality. The fact is that intimate relationships between faculty and students are most often initiated by students (e.g., Dank and Fulda, 1998; Gallop, 1997; Skeen and Nielsen, 1983). This certainly runs counter to the image of the lecherous professor pouncing on little girls when they are most vulnerable.

If the image of the female student as Little Red Riding Hood is detrimental to women, the image of the male professor as an incestuous Big Bad Wolf is just as detrimental to male teachers. The two images combined fuel the hysteria over consensual relations. When

we cast the key players in this debate as innocent, unsuspecting, and childlike on the one hand and manipulative and lecherous on the other, we have already decided the fate of the debate before it has even begun.

Relationships between people of different statuses and unequal institutional power are not unique to the academy. In fact, all relationships are unequal to some extent. The only relationships that do not have any power differentials would have to be those between a same sex, same race, same income, same ethnicity couple! And as absurd as that may seem, even this list is not comprehensive and does not include all the dimensions along which power is distributed in a given society. What, then, is it about the academy that evokes so much disgust and outrage as far as student-faculty relationships are concerned?

Like Lewis (1997: 8), I would suggest that our educational institutions suffer from "the spirit of exalted specialness"—the belief that, colleges, universities and professors are "special in their presumed service to humanity's laudable pursuit of truth's variety and special in their presumed responsiveness to a creed whose moral and ethical requirements are far more stringent than those governing social intercourse...." (Lewis, 1997: 152). It is because of this perceived special status of teachers that even consensual sexual relations between students and faculty are seen as a kind of perversion. The claim to a higher moral standard affects sexual harassment on campuses in two opposing ways. On the one hand, it breeds neglect of harassment incidents, since no one wants to admit that teachers, who claim an almost sacred status, would indulge in such acts. On the other hand, when these incidents do become public knowledge, they result in a kind of moral panic leading to many teachers being unduly accused and punished for sexual harassment.

Even when there is no evidence of coercion, strict disciplinary action is sometimes taken against the professor. This was certainly the case in *Korf v. Ball State University* (1984). The following AAUP statement of professional ethics was used to uphold the decision of the university to fire Professor Korf for being involved in a consensual relationship with a student: "The professor, guided by

a *deep conviction of the worth and dignity* of *the advancement of knowledge, recognizes the special responsibilities* placed on him...." (cited in Stites, 1996:118, emphasis added). Once again the sacredness and specialness of the job is used as a way of legitimizing the stringent measures taken against faculty members who are involved in consensual relations. This is similar to the evocation of the father-daughter bond, where the mere idea of sexual intimacy is vulgar and repulsive, and which casts the perpetrator as perverted and the most deplorable of human beings.

I agree with Hoffman (1986) and Gallop (1994) that sexual harassment is a structural problem and should be fought through a broader campaign against discrimination and the sexual objectification of women. I also believe that consensual relationships should *not* be considered sexual harassment. Part of the reason that they are, is precisely because the images of women as innocent children and of professors as lecherous father figures work together to produce a distorted picture of intimate relations between professors and college students.

The first step toward changing our perception of these relationships is to rethink our images of professors and of the academy. Lewis (1997:152) proposes the following reform: "Eschewing the timeworn and counterproductive assumptions of specialness, institutions of higher learning should be treated as ordinary work settings, and faculty, however demanding their assigned tasks, as ordinary workers." In the context of sexual harassment policies, this would mean that not only can faculty and students enter into intimate relations with whomever they please, but also that should a charge of harassment be brought forth by a person involved in the relationship, the relationship would come under investigation, as would be the case in another work environment. Any effort by colleagues, departments, or institutions to cover up harassment incidents would be dealt with as a serious breach of policy. At the same time, it would protect against unfair treatment of people who are involved in consensual relations by not portraying them as perverted transgressors of a sacred bond.

Second, the images of women as weak, helpless and childlike need to be abandoned. Such stereotypes reinforce women's status

as passive objects of desire, and deny women the status of desiring subjects. The images of predatory, aggressive, agentic male sexuality versus the images of victimized, passive female sexuality are harmful to women. Jane Gallop (1997:38) writes:

> Prohibition of consensual teacher-student relations is based on the assumption that when a student says yes she really means no. I cannot help but think that this proceeds from the same logic according to which when a woman says no she really means yes. The first assumption is protectionist; the second is the very logic of harassment. What harassment and protectionism have in common is precisely a refusal to credit women's desires. Common to both is the assumption that women do not know what we want, that someone else, in a position of greater power, knows better.

Thus policies that seek to protect women from potential abuse eventually reinforce women's powerlessness and must be rejected in favor of policies that affirm women's agency. At the same time, images of women as frail, gullible, and naïve, and those of professors as lecherous and calculating must be rejected as well. It is time to abandon these images and the consequent fears and emotions they evoke. It is time to expel Little Red Riding Hood and the Big Bad Wolf from our college campuses. Only then will we be able to carry out this debate in a more productive manner.

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